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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the role played by media use diversity in shaping public opinion during the 1979 campaign to elect a representative from Great Britain to the European Parliament. The study focused on the British audience's evaluation of the clarity of the campaign issues as presented in the media and on individual cognitions about Europe formed prior to the campaign (cognitive stability). Data used in the study were gathered through interviews conducted with 372 potential voters in two separate cities. Subjects responded to questions concerning their perceived clarity of the campaign issues, their personal opinions concerning Europe, and the extent of their exposure to various media. Results indicated that people equally exposed to election information from different media during the campaign had a more confused perception of the campaign issues and showed higher levels of cognitive instability than did individuals who were exposed to only one source of information. The findings suggest that if exposure to the campaign had been measured only in terms of reliance on a single news source, it would show that media use reinforced previously held opinions. However, measuring communication exposure in terms of diversity revealed that the media were able to change opinions. (FL)

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Theory and Methodology Division

DIVERSITY OF CAMPAIGN EXPOSURE AND COGNITIVE STABILITY IN BRITAIN

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Introduction

On May 3, 1979, 76 percent of the British electorate went to the polls in a general election which led to the formation of Mrs. Thatcher's government. A month later, on June 6, 1979, only 33 percent bothered to vote to elect their representatives to the European Parliament. Clearly for the British, the Euro-election came very much as an anti-climax to their own general election. Actually, the low involvement of the British public in the European election campaign could be thought of as problematic for several other reasons:

- Up until June 1979, the public had no experience with direct European elections. The work of the previous (not directly elected) Europarliament remained barely visible to the public and few candidates established a reputation as "European" politicians.

- A supranational political body was to be elected whose importance was rather abstract in relation to the national, regional, or personal interests of the British voters.

- This election was not to result in the formation or restructuring of a government. It was certainly meant, however, to have an important symbolic value, that of increasing the European consciousness of the population, as well as focusing public attention toward the goal of European integration (Schulz and Schönbach, 1980).

Against this background, the Europarliament contest had to be waged in less than a month by political parties and media organizations which offered

no guarantee that they would be as committed as in a general election (Blumler, 1979). In light of its anticlimactic quality, it seems likely that this campaign would have less of an overall impact on the British audience than the previous national election, centered on more tangible domestic issues.

Given these conditions, it is relevant to ask whether information transmitted between May 9, the date when the campaign officially started, and June 5 led to any sort of opinion change on the part of the British public.

Research Objectives

The focus of this paper is the question of the impact of campaign communication exposure, first on the audience's evaluation of the clarity of the European election campaign, and second on individual cognitions about Europe. Its object is to estimate the relative influence of various categories of election information both on campaign-bound perceptions and on attitudes likely to have been acquired prior to the campaign itself.

Evidence of a change in attitudes directly following an election campaign is an indication that the information transmitted during the campaign had some effect. In such a case, coverage of the election includes information important enough to modify people's opinions and convey a clear impression of the campaign.

We contend, however, that in this particular election, the context of the campaign didn't provide conditions for a potentially effective media campaign.

Indeed, what was at stake in this election remained rather unclear in Britain. D. Steel, leader of the Liberal Party, qualified it in his May 29, 1979, press conference as "a postscriptum to the general election . . . a minor extension of British political life." This formula summarizes the general consensus: to a great extent the contest between Labor and Conservative parties was a repetition and an extension of the general election to European issues.

Thus the Euroelection, with its mix of European and domestic ingredients, presented British voters with no clear-cut issues of the kind that would neatly divide parties. There was actually strong disagreement within the Labor party on the issue of Britain's position in the Community, a fact that could potentially lead to conflicting media coverage. Moreover, Euro-candidates were a novelty, the majority having never held political office before, resulting for the voters in a lack of familiarity with their potential representatives.

This contest, coming only four short weeks after a major national election, caught parties and media organizations weary with campaigning, thus leading to a low intensity of campaign coverage. Against this background, it is expected that the audience's opinions are unlikely to be changed as a result of the campaign, as they might have been in a more politically significant national contest.

Thus, it is hypothesized that exposure to election communication will result in stable cognitions. This should be especially true for the affective dimension of individuals' political orientations, such as opinions towards Europe and Britain's position in it. Such orientations are not

the product of campaign related events, but rather established over a long period of time, and thus less likely to change.

Should we find that media exposure leads to unstable results, it would be evidence for some media effects.

Impressions formed of the campaign clarity, a more election-specific perception, are expected to vary as a function of the amount and type of election information received. We believe, however, that not all sources of campaign information have the same effect and that much depends on which medium carries the information.

Research which has focused on the media's role in influencing the cognitive images people hold of their political system has traditionally assumed frequency and/or intensity of exposure to be the indicator of the strength of the media stimulus. During an election campaign, however, the audience's exposure to election related material is embedded in a complex of social and media behaviors. Voting decisions or political opinions may be reinforced by the direct influence of viewing party broadcasts on television, but they may be simultaneously affected by other information sources: interpersonal contacts, political advertising, etc. Analyzing cognitive effects in light of the unique contribution of a particular source is too narrow a view of the complexity of communication stimuli at election time; it ignores the possibility that a given type of information may trigger a diverse set of social processes which may themselves have effects. In other words, a conversation with friends may stimulate someone to watch a current affairs program on television, while viewing a party broadcast can turn someone else off and result in deliberate avoidance of election

related material for a time.

Patterson (1980) provides evidence of a substantial overlap of news sources which serves the function of crystallizing opinions about the election. In their research on presidential debates, McLeod et al. (1978) came to stronger conclusions about the impact of debates by taking a broader view and taking account of such related processes as discussion of the debates, following accounts of them in the media, etc.

We believe in taking a broader view of communication exposure, in including the competing sources of information vying for the public's attention at election time, and in considering the fact that individual response to these stimuli may vary from addiction to a single kind of information to reliance on many alternative sources.

The Concept of Diversity

The pervasiveness of multiple channels of exposure to political communication (Kraus and Davis, 1976) led us to search for a measure reflecting individual diversity of exposure to alternative sources of information. The criterion of diversity has been studied before as a characteristic of a social system rather than as an individual attribute. Two studies (Chaffee and Wilson, 1977; Busterna, 1979) suggest that diversity in a community's collective political perceptions is a function of community media characteristics. Both used the standard information theory formula (Shannon and Weaver, 1949) to measure the concept.

However, as Schramm (1955) suggested early on, diversity or entropy can also be applied to the measurement of individual-level phenomena. One

study (Danowski and Ruchinskas, 1980) has developed such an individual measure of diversity of exposure. Diversity is indexed by the degree of equiprobability in exposure to different sources; thus as amount of exposure to alternative media such as newspapers, television, interpersonal contacts becomes more evenly distributed, usage becomes more entropic, moving closer to an equiprobable distribution. This index appears to be a satisfying measure of diversity of exposure, provided the researcher can assume the various sources to be equally important for information about the election campaign.

In the present research, available items reflecting communication exposure included frequency of time spent with newspaper reports, family, friends, television news, political party broadcasts, current affairs broadcasts. Since party, current affairs broadcasts, and TV news are considered separately even though each is disseminated via the television channel, it is more meaningful to distinguish between types of content rather than between channels, as they are conventionally referred to by media effects researchers.

In an attempt to get at the underlying attributes of these heterogeneous types of election material, a factor analysis was performed, yielding two factors that hint at two distinct types of content: one straightforward substantive issue content (political party broadcasts, current affairs programs); the other, a less structured type of election information (talking with family, friends, watching television news, reading newspaper reports).

The question then becomes: is an individual attending equally to these two types of information content more or less likely to have stable opinions

than an individual exposed to one single genre of election information?

As early as 1954, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee had concerned themselves with the heterogeneity of the voters' communication exposure during the campaign; more specifically, the researchers found that those persons reporting discussions with homogeneous groups were less likely to change their positions during the campaign than were persons reporting political discussions with heterogeneous social contacts.

Clearly there can be heterogeneity of content within channels as well as between channels of exposure. A content analysis of the different categories of election information would allow one to rank order them in terms of the homogeneity or diversity of coverage of election material. In the absence of such a tool, we can only assume that given the context of this campaign, it is likely that some informations will be conflicting or divergent while others will be redundant and more structured. In the first case, exposure is expected to lead to more confusion for the audience; in the latter, to more clarity.

It is expected, however, that the above relationships will not hold across all levels of partisan identification, with strongly partisan individuals showing more stable attitudes than more volatile respondents. Moreover, more frequent campaign media use may not coincide with more stable political orientations across all sources of exposure.

Robinson's (1976) findings on what he terms "videomalaise"--political malaise resulting from television reliance, the fact that television news in Britain, as in the U.S., seems to be diffused to a largely inadvertent audience, and the relatively high credibility of network news--do not suggest that reliance on television news necessarily will lead to stable orientations.

Methodology

The data presented here were part of a larger study of the relative impact of the 1979 General Election and European Parliament election on voter involvement in Britain.[1] They result from two waves of personal interviews conducted during May and June of 1979 with 372 potential voters aged 18 and over in Bristol and Manchester constituencies.

Perceived clarity of the campaign agenda was straightforwardly, albeit somewhat simplistically, assessed by the following item, which had possible responses of "very clearly," "fairly clearly," "not very clearly," or "not at all clearly."

> On the whole, how clearly do you think the problems facing Britain in the Common Market emerged during the European election campaign?

Cognitive stability measures were formed by combining responses to items regarding individual opinions about Europe. In both waves, respondents were asked:

> Some people say that Britain would get more out of Europe if we were more willing to co-operate with our Common Market partners; others think that we need to be firmer with the Common Market if Britain's interests are to be protected. Which of these views is closer to your opinion?

and:

> Some people think of the Common Market as being a first step towards a closer union between the member states. Do you think the movement towards the unification of Europe should be speeded up, slowed down or continued as present?

Consistent responses (including "don't know" responses) on each attitude dimension were added across both waves to form a dichotomous measure of cognitive stability (stable/unstable) on both attitudes items . Often stability of attitudes has beer operationalized in terms of intercorrelations among attitudes and opinions arbitrarily assumed to represent

"liberal" and "conservative" frames of reference. The advantage of this operationalization is that it doesn't attempt to take into account the underlying "ideological" component of attitudes; nor does it attempt to predict the directionality or intensity of opinions. It is simply a measure of stability of cognitions.

The items reflecting communication exposure were all of the same form, tapping the amount of time spent with a given source. For example, once it was assessed that respondents had read newspaper reports about the European elections during the couple of weeks before polling day, they were asked:

> Would you say that you read such reports on most days during that period, two or three days a week, or less often than that?

The measure of diversity of exposure was based on the formula

$$D = \frac{-\Sigma\ p_i \log_2 p_i}{\log_2 N} \qquad \text{or} \qquad \frac{\text{observed entropy}}{\text{maximum entropy}}$$

where p_i is the proportion of individual exposure allocated to a particular type of content expressed as the sum of factor scores relative to the total exposure, and N is the number of categories of content.

The resulting diversity index always has values ranging from 0 to 1.00. It was divided into a three-point scale of high, medium, and low diversity for purposes of comparison with the other measures of exposure. This measure of diversity thus indexes the degree of rectangularity in the distribution of an individual's exposure to different types of content as determined by the factor analysis, relative to the maximum possible rectangularity. The more exposure is equally divided across types of content, the higher

the diversity scores.

Results

The data for the overall sample support the hypothesis that frequency of campaign communication exposure is associated with perceived clarity of election campaign (Table 1). The greater the reliance on party originated information, the more respondents indicated that campaign issues emerged clearly for them during the campaign. Greater reliance on televised information, either in the form of TV news or current affairs broadcasts, was also associated with more positive campaign evaluation. Frequency of discussion with friends was even more strongly associated with the above. The disparity between political broadcasts and newspaper reliance in their associations with the clarity of the campaign is not surprising if one considers content; indeed, party broadcasts provide straightforward unidimensional treatment of arguments while newspapers, having a greater channel capacity in terms of issue coverage, are less clear.

Of special interest is the strong negative correlation between diversity of exposure and perceived clarity of the campaign, a result supporting our contention that high diversity of exposure may be more conducive to individual confusion about campaign issues than sustained attention to a given type of information content.

Table 1 illustrates another clear pattern regarding the proposition that diversity of exposure and time spent with single media should be inversely related to cognitive stability. The correlations between diversity and the two measures of cognitive stability run in the predicted direction and with the same consistency, which is surprising considering that these two measures were not intercorrelated and are assumed to represent two differ-

ent types of orientations. Persons reporting extensive use of newspapers and current affairs broadcasts during the campaign were less likely to switch opinions than were the sample members whose exposure was more entropic. Also noteworthy is that reliance on television news was not associated with stability of opinion on the unification of Europe, yet it bore a significant positive association with the stability of opinion on Britain's stand on the Common Market.

When the same-correlation matrix was run within high (some college) and within low (no college) education groups, frequency of communication exposure was consistently and more strongly related to perceived clarity of the campaign for the less educated (Table 2). This suggests that media have more of an integrative impact on cognitive clarity among less educated audience members.

Increased diversity was associated with increased confusion among high school (or less) educated respondents, suggesting they may have a more difficult time processing highly diverse types of election material.

The correlations between frequency of exposure and the measures of cognitive stability ran in the predicted direction for both groups. Exposure to TV news was clearly more tied to stability among college-educated respondents. The differences between correlations for the educational groups were particularly evident when respondents relied on current affairs programs. Diversity of exposure was associated with less stable orientations for less educated respondents, which is evidence that campaign exposure had some effect: it led to a change of opinion.

Differences attributed to strong versus weak levels of partisanship

indicated that for both groups frequency of exposure was associated with campaign clarity (Table 3). Differences between correlations, however, ran in the opposite direction when diversity of exposure was the measure of media use, and this was particularly true for strong partisans.

Similarly, negative correlations were found between diversity of exposure and stability of orientations for the highly partisan group; this suggests that exposure to highly diverse types of content may have a stronger impact on people holding strong opinions on issues than on persons with looser ties to their parties, resulting for some in confusion. The differences between correlations for the two groups were evident when respondents relied on newspapers or on current affairs broadcasts, both types of exposure being associated with increased stability for the strong partisans.

The findings across levels of campaign interest did not show clear patterns of association (Table 4). Strong initial correlations between interest and perceived clarity of the campaign ($r = .29^{**}$) and between interest and one of the stability measures ($r = .13^{**}$) suggested that this indicator was by itself a stronger predictor than the background characteristics.

As a result, campaign interest was entered as an independent variable in multiplication classification analyses. This technique allows examination of the effects of single independent variables once the effects of all other variables are held constant. The results of the analyses in which sex, age and education were entered as covariates are presented in Table 5.

As we can see, diversity of exposure stands up as a significant independent variable having effects on both perceived clarity of the campaign

and cognitive orientations, when all other variables are held constant. Newspaper reliance has essentially no impact, while reliance on television news is significantly associated with stability of cognitions on Britain's handling of Europe, but is not even a weak predictor on the other dimension of stability. Obviously here knowledge of the specific content of television news on these two dimensions would be needed to further explore the relationship. In the case of perceived clarity of the campaign, the highly significant beta coefficient for campaign interest deserves further attention. Examination of cell means indicated a significant interaction ($p < .01$) between diversity and interest, in effect rendering difficult the interpretation of the beta coefficients. It is illustrated graphically in Figure 1:

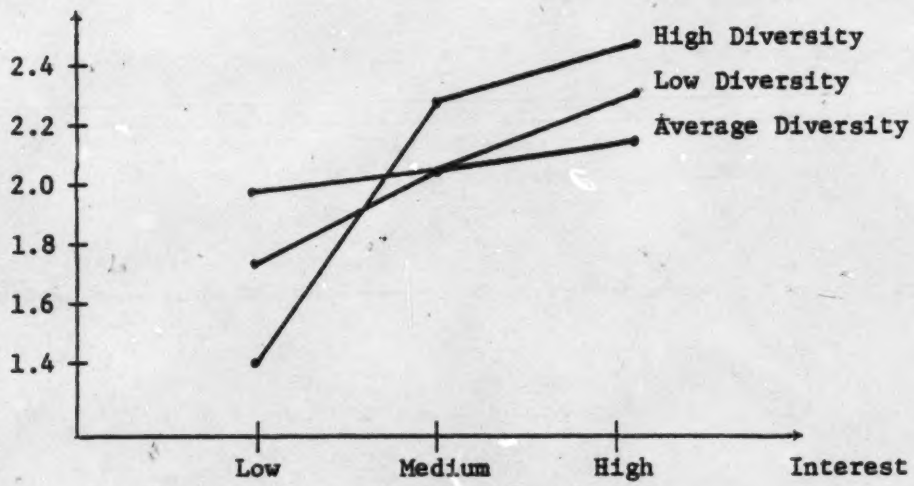

Figure 1: Diversity: a conditional variable in the relationship between campaign interest and perceived campaign clarity.

As the figure illustrates, the relationship between interest and diversity is disordinal, suggesting the complexity of communication stimuli. This is evidence that different levels of diversity of exposure may trigger different levels of attitudes which may themselves have effect.

Discussion

This paper has made a case for the need for more penetrating research into the question of diversity of communication exposure. The above results indicate that people equally exposed to different types of election information during this campaign had a more confused perception of the campaign agenda and showed higher levels of cognitive instability than individuals who were exposed to one single category of information.

If exposure to the campaign had been measured solely in terms of reliance on a single source, it would indicate that media use reinforced previously held opinions; however, measuring communication exposure in terms of diversity provides evidence that even in a second-order campaign like this one, media was able to change people's opinions.

Clearly it is not communication-related behavior per se, but the specific content of the information which generated the effect. If highly diverse media use led to individual political confusion, it may be due to the fact that conflicting or divergent reports were presented across the different media and by the political parties.

One might argue that in less than four weeks of campaigning, reporting was by necessity more intense and compact, thus providing a potentially high concentration of issues over a short time; the audience would have

encountered difficulties in processing this heavy load of information and it led to confusion, especially for less educated respondents.

Consequently a more content-based approach to the question of diversity is needed, since affective changes in political orientations are likely to be resulting from information gained from the media as opposed to being a direct consequence of media use per se (Becker et al., 1978).

It would be useful to continue to use this measure of communication exposure in conjunction with indices of time spent with single media, since it may be more sensitive to the actual information processing. Indeed, all individuals employ some combination of interpersonal and mediated communication in varying proportions. Theoretically, this measure is appealing, since at present there is no standardization of units of communication exposure in the field, which unfortunately contributes to the disparity of reported media effect findings (McLeod and Reeves, 1977).

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Jay G. Blumler, Director of the Centre for Television Research, University of Leeds, for making these data available.

Table 1. Correlations (r) Between Frequency of Communication Exposure and Cognitive Orientations.

	Diversity	Newspaper	Family	Friends	TV News	Party Broadcasts	Current Affairs Broadcasts
Cognitive Stability I[1]	-.13**	.09*	.07	.06	.19**	.03	.11*
Cognitive Stability II[2]	-.13**	.11*	.08	.06	.00	-.04	.09*
Perceived Clarity of Eurocampaign	-.18**	.09*	.10*	.18**	.15**	.21**	.14**

N = 372

** p < .01

* p < .05

1. Stability of opinion on Britain's handling of Europe.
2. Stability of opinion on the unification of Europe.

Table 2. Correlations (r) Between Frequency of Communication Exposure and Cognitive Orientations by Level of Education.[1]

	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
	Diversity		Newspaper		Family		Friends		TV News		Party Broadcasts		Current Affairs Broadcasts	
Cognitive Stability I[2]	-.20*	-.13*	.03	.14*	.15	.06	.02	.10*	.12	.08	.15	-.01	.14	.11*
Cognitive Stability II[3]	-.08	-.14**	.24*	..05	.10	.05	.07	.04	.18*	.06	.10	-.07	-.02	.12*
Perceived Clarity of Eurocampaign	.03	-.23**	-.01	.12*	-.07	.15**	-.01	.24**	-.05	.11*	-.03	.27**	.05	.16**

N = 372

** p < .01

* p < .05

1. High = at least some college; low = no college.
2. See Table 1.
3. See Table 1.

Table 3. Correlations (r) Between Frequency of Communications Exposure and Cognitive Orientations by Strength of Partisanship.[1]

	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
	Diversity		Newspaper		Family		Friends		TV News		Party Broadcasts		Current Affairs Broadcasts	
Cognitive Stability I[2]	-.22**	-.00	.13*	.02	.11	.02	.07	.06	.15*	.00	-.03	.13	.15**	.02
Cognitive Stability II[3]	-.18**	-.09	.18**	.01	.18**	-.08	.09	.02	.08	.09	.00	-.10	.12*	.05
Perceived Clarity of Eurocampaign	-.20**	-.12	.10	.08	.07	.16*	.15**	.22**	.06	.09	.22**	.19*	.20**	-.01

N = 372

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

1. High = fairly, very strong; low = not very strong.
2. See Table 1.
3. See Table 1.

Table 4. Correlations (r) Between Frequency of Communication Exposure and Cognitive Orientations by Campaign Interest.[1]

	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
	Diversity		Newspaper		Family		Friends		TV News		Party Broadcasts		Current Affairs Broadcasts	
Cognitive Stability I[2]	-.20**	-.08	.05	.13*	.08	.06	.05	.08	.21**	.16**	.01	.06	.16*	.06
Cognitive Stability II[3]	-.08	-.14*	.15*	.05	.03	.07	.07	.00	.03	-.05	-.09	-.05	.02	.12*
Perceived Clarity of Eurocampaign	.01	-.27**	.04	.09	-.00	.10	.07	.19**	.13*	.14*	.08	.26**	.04	.14*

N = 372

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

1. High = Very, fairly, slightly interested; low = not at all interested.
2. See Table 1.
3. See Table 1.

Table 5. Communication Exposure, Cognitive Orientations, and Perceived Interest in British Electorate, 1979: Multiple Classification Analysis Controlling for Sex, Age and Education.

	Cognitive Stability I	Cognitive Stability II	Perceived Clarity of Eurocampaign
Diversity	.12**	.11**	.11**
Newspapers Reliance	.04	.03	.01
TV News Reliance	.20**	.04	.12**
Campaign Interest	.02	.12**	.28**
Multiple R^1	.26	.23	.35
N	(372)	(372)	(372)

** Significant at .01 level.

1. Adjusted for degrees of freedom.

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